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**TELEGRAM**

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E.O. 11652:  
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FROM  
Ambassy BUENOS AIRES

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Church and State: The Catholic Bishops Steer Middle Course

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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

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Exemption(s):

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1. Summary. Bishops of Catholic Church have spoken out cautiously on concerns over economic hardships and violations of human rights but have made clear their overall support for new military GOA. Church has internal differences of opinion on positions it should take, but is not ready to assume role of leadership which it has taken in Chile. End Summary.
2. About 70 Argentine Bishops met in 33rd Assembly of Episcopal Conference week of May 10 to elect officers and to prepare pastoral letter giving Church views on current scene. Groupings of Bishops whose attitudes run from the conservative to the very liberal left took more than one ballot in each case to elect officers. They settled on Archbishop of

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Cordoba, Cardinal Raul Francisco Primatesta, to head corps of prelates as President, a man generally recognized to fall in almost the exact middle as a moderate. According to press accounts, Primatesta's best known quality has been his adherence to positions which identify him with neither the conservatives nor the liberals. As Archbishop of Cordoba he has reputation for cordial but correct relations with both military governments (1966 - 1973) and Peronism (1973 - 1976), guarding Church autonomy zealously. Overall impression of new officials of assembly of bishops is one of careful balancing of conservatives and moderates, with some newly bishops of moderate to progressive views moving to the forefront. Papal Nuncio was absent, in Rome, during conference.

3. Reports indicate that bishops discarded draft of pastoral letter which had been prepared beforehand with assistance of lay figures closely linked to the Church. Draft was said to have concerned itself almost exclusively with the spiritual, while bishops apparently recognized that letter had to treat realities of current social developments in Argentina. Efforts of more populist bishops to insert strong criticisms of GOA and military met counter-efforts of conservatives, and final result was reported to be compromise drafted by Primatesta himself.

4. Pastoral letter released May 15 reflected effort to

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separate Church from identification with any particular political line, emphasizing its concern with nation and people as a whole rather than with governments and problems of the moment. It proceeded in "on the/hand - but on the other" manner through rest of text. Individuals, families and intermediate society must not be "absorbed" by State, it said, but at same time State must not remain mere spectator to chaos and immorality. State must not renounce exercise of just and necessary authority, even coercion, but individual must retain his liberty. "Liberal individualism" leading to chaos and infringement on rights of others must not rule, but neither must State totalitarianism of left or right prevail. The State must promote common good in all areas, but in proper manner.

5. Letter then plunged into heart of matter: common good and human rights are permanent and inalienable, and no emergency authorizes the ignoring of them. But manner of treating them varies with circumstances of place and time in which they are exercised. In present disastrous political and economic situation in Argentina, in climate of violence (i.e., of extremism), it is not reasonable to expect full enjoyment of common good or of rights to same degree as in time of abundance and peace.

6. In such a "difficult moment," Bishops appeal to all for strict compliance with duty and at same time for "maximum

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understanding and tolerance toward involuntary errors of others." Such understanding is necessary because each judges reality from own point of view. One favors security, one personal liberty. One gives priority to rapid economic recovery while another faces hunger or the inability to buy needed medicines.

7. In delicate balance, it was labeled sinful to neglect others in the face of hunger, in order to win uncontrolled profits, as well as to kill or kidnap regardless of political inclination of the perpetrator. In a very practical litany of reminders to both those in power and to those opposed, the bishops noted that even with goodwill it was easy to err by expecting - a) a halt to three-figure inflation or a lowering of prices in one month (since comp), b) that security forces act with "chemical purity of peacetime while blood runs every day," c) that disorder can be provoked without accepting drastic repercussions, d) not to have to sacrifice some quota of liberty to requirements of common good, e) that Marxist solutions can be sought under the guise of "evangelical rationale."

8. It would also produce error - a) if in eagerness to gain security there were indiscriminate detentions, incomprehensibly long, ignorance of fate of the detained, incommunicado status of long duration, and denial of religious aid, b) if, for the same end, constitutional

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guarantees were suppressed or the right of defense limited, e) if in search of economic recuperation the people were taken to the brink of misery by the play of prices and salaries or unjustified loss of jobs, d) if the media were unnecessarily prevented from speaking truth, and, e) to confuse efforts, often of Christian origin, to defend poor and helpless with political subversion, Marxism, or guerrilla warfare.

9. Letter closed with call to all sectors, inclining Govt, citizens, business, workers, Justice, media and youth to contribute to recovery with wisdom and tolerance, together with best efforts of Church.

10. Cardinal Primate and new board members met with Pres. Videla after conference and presented him with pastoral letter. There has been no Videla or GOA response. In press conference, Cardinal carefully avoided any controversial comment.

11. Comment. Church in Argentina has not taken prominent role in events of last few years, and it appears to be intent of moderates who hold balance among bishops not to allow themselves to be put in category either of being pro-Junta or in opposition. Pastoral statement was so balanced that both conservatives and liberals can read into it what they will, and exhortations on respect for human rights, while undoubtedly sincere, will not have

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great impact. If human rights situation takes on dimensions of Chilean problem, which it does not yet approach, the Church may willingly or involuntarily be thrust into a more prominent position. For the time being, it does not appear to be a principal player on the Argentine scene.

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